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# SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Fact Sheet  
**37**

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## ***What are the School Nutrition programs?***

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) offer nutritious meals for students in participating public and private nonprofit schools across the country. After-school snacks and suppers may also be available. In Fiscal 2009, Maryland schools served more than 96 million meals and over 1.8 million snacks to students.

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## ***How did the programs begin?***

Congress created the National School Lunch Program in 1946 because many young war recruits were in poor physical condition. Congress saw the program as a national readiness measure because poor nutrition had endangered our war effort. Congress authorized the School Breakfast Program when it passed the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. On the federal level, the programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture; in Maryland, they are administered by the Maryland State Department of Education.

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## ***Does my child's school serve breakfast?***

Almost all public schools in Maryland offer breakfast for students daily. Call your child's school and ask if breakfast is served. If it is not, let the principal know you would like school breakfast to be an option for your child and that you think school breakfast is an important part of the academic day.

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## ***What is the nutritional value of school meals?***

The NSLP and SBP make an essential contribution to students' daily nutrient intake. School meals must meet federal nutrition guidelines that are based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Over a week's time, school lunch provides at least 33% of a student's Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) for protein, calcium, iron, Vitamin A, and Vitamin C. School breakfast provides at least 25% of a student's RDA for these nutrients. Many schools offer whole grain options, fresh fruits and vegetables, and lower sodium foods. This dedication to good health is particularly important during a time when childhood obesity is on the rise for our nation's youth.

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## ***How do school meals compare to meals from home?***

- Students who eat school lunches consume fewer calories from fat than those who bring lunch from home.
- NSLP participants have substantially lower intakes of added sugars than do non-participants.
- Compared to lunches from home, school lunches contain:
  - √ Three times as many dairy products,
  - √ Twice as much fruit, and
  - √ Seven times the vegetable amounts.

According to the School Nutrition Association, "The meals served as part of the NSLP are provided in age-appropriate serving sizes -- making schools one of the last places in the U.S. where you can purchase a meal with the recommended serving sizes."

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### ***What's the link between nutrition and learning?***

Research has shown that participation in school meals translates into students who are healthier and more prepared for their academic day.

- Children who eat breakfast at school -- closer to test-taking time -- perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat at home (Vaisman N, Voet H, Akivis A, Vakil E. "Effects of Breakfast Timing on the Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students." *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 1996 150:1089-1092.).
- Participating in school breakfast is also associated with improved math grades, attendance and punctuality.
- Low income elementary school girls who participate in the School Breakfast, School Lunch, or Food Supplement Program (FSP), formerly the Food Stamp Program, or any combination of these programs, have significantly less risk of being overweight (Jones SJ, Jahns L, Laraia BA, Haughton B. "Lower Risk of Overweight in School-aged Food Insecure Girls Who Participate in Food Assistance: Results from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 2003; 157:780-84.).

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### ***How much do School Meals cost?***

Each school system sets its own prices for School Breakfast and School Lunch. Call your child's school for prices. On average it costs less to buy a school lunch than to bring a lunch from home of the same nutritional value.

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### ***Can I prepay for my child's meals?***

Nearly every school has a system in place to accept advance payment for School Meals. Some schools offer a discount for prepaid meals. Call your child's school for more information.

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### ***What if I can't afford School Meals?***

Some children can receive free or very low-cost meals. Students who qualify for reduced price meals pay no more than 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch.

At the beginning of each school year, schools send home a Meal Benefit Application. Once you have the form, all you need to do is fill it out and return it. The school will let you know whether or not your child qualifies. If a member of your household receives FSP or Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) benefits, you may receive a letter stating that your child has been directly certified. If you receive such a letter, you do not need to fill out an application because your child is already approved for free meals. If your family's financial situation changes during the school year, you can fill out a Meal Benefit Application at any time. All the information on the application is confidential and your child will not be identified to others if he or she receives free or reduced price meals.

For more information about school nutrition programs, contact the School and Community Nutrition Programs Branch at 410-767-0214 or go to [www.eatsmartmaryland.org](http://www.eatsmartmaryland.org).